

## Teaching the *Canterbury Tales* in American high schools

Donna Dermond

*'Our work is to create the enthusiasts of tomorrow'*

(Helen Cooper, New Chaucer Society Congress, Boulder, Colorado, 2002)

Chaucer's poetry is disappearing from the American high school curriculum. A number of interrelated reasons account for its gradual demise: the absence of a standard, national curriculum, choices about curriculum which are often based on the ethnic makeup of individual classrooms, a diminishing number of teachers who have a passion for teaching Chaucer, and American high school students' limited knowledge of and interest in the history and literature of the Middle Ages. Many educators believe that Chaucer will be taught in fewer and fewer American high schools.

Despite formidable obstacles, teachers have developed creative and effective ways to engage students with Chaucer's texts. Educators have discovered what many other readers have discovered: the material itself is intrinsically fascinating and engaging since it speaks to the human condition across the ages. The essence of teaching Chaucer is to engage high school students in his poetry so that his words speak directly to them.

This paper describes four proven techniques to engage students. They include:

- **Inquiry:** a student-directed method of exploring the Middle Ages and understanding the contexts for the *Canterbury Tales*.
- **Character Map:** a visual method to understand the various characters in the *Canterbury Tales*.
- **Chaucerian Pilgrimage:** a technique in which students create their own pilgrimage to important and interesting places on their campus, while relating tales they have developed in the style of Chaucer.
- **Students as Teachers:** a format in which students teach selected *Canterbury Tales* to their classmates.

### Curriculum issues

No standard curriculum guides American high schools. Instead, each of the fifty states and more importantly, thousands of local school districts, are responsible for educational content. A state with a standard curriculum is rare, and even at district and school levels common curriculum is unusual. In most cases, individual teachers determine course content.

Since the United States is geographically so large, the population so diverse, and the desire to make sure that government does not dictate to citizens so strong, there may never be a standard curriculum in American high schools. Of course individual states expect students to demonstrate prescribed levels of competence in reading and writing before graduation, but teachers reach these goals in literally hundreds of ways. In the United States, teachers choose from a myriad of high quality texts to teach reading skills.

Because there is no standardized literature curriculum in the United States, there is no nationally standardized test for literature. Unlike students in the United Kingdom, American students do not take formal written nationally-standardized examinations either to evaluate their knowledge of literature, or to determine their admission to colleges and

universities. Instead, almost all American universities and colleges require applicants to complete the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), which is written and evaluated by the College Entrance Examination Board, Educational Testing Service, a private corporation. The test has three sections: verbal, math, and essay writing, and for each section a perfect score is 800. The number of points students score on this test affects their college admission since different colleges require different minimum scores; the most prestigious institutions require the highest scores. Although the test originated as an intelligence test, neither section of the SAT tests intelligence or specific content knowledge, but rather the students' ability to reason verbally and mathematically. Many students take classes for the specific purpose of raising their scores on these tests.

American high school students may enroll in Advanced Placement courses, which prepare them to take Advanced Placement (AP) Examinations in various subjects, including literature. Any student of high school age, fourteen-eighteen years, may take these examinations. The test, which is evaluated on a scale of one to five, where five is the highest score, affects students' college placement. For example, certain colleges and universities will accept passing scores for academic credit. Any score over three is considered passing, but every college follows a different protocol. Some will only accept scores of five for credit, while others may be willing to accept scores as low as three. If the college does not accept AP test scores for actual credit, a strong performance on the test could allow a student to enrol in a more advanced course than first year students normally take.

Again, these tests are written and evaluated in accordance with standards developed by the College Board. Every literature test includes both objective and essay questions; however, the specific content of the AP literature test is different every year. No teacher or student knows in advance of the test which authors will be included. Therefore, in the United States, there is no external motivation such as a formal written examination, to teach specific authors.

### **Chaucer's place in the curriculum**

A teacher's choice of text depends on many factors. The school district may have adopted an anthology which determines what titles students read. In most anthologies, Chaucer appears in translation. Textbooks represent a substantial investment, and many states are currently decreasing school budgets. Consequently, administrators ask the English faculty to teach from the anthology to avoid the extra expense of buying individual titles.

An American high school may have a majority of non-English speaking students which will certainly influence teachers' choices about texts. A colleague recently said, 'I'm teaching English as a Second Language, and I'm developing *new* reading curriculum.' Within a single high school classroom, the students' reading competencies may range from those of a typical eight-year-old to those of a postgraduate. Although Chaucer is typically taught to 12<sup>th</sup> graders who are seventeen or eighteen years old, their reading competence is likely to vary significantly.

Both American teachers and students are ethnically diverse, and in some situations several languages both European and Asian are spoken in a single classroom. Even though the *Canterbury Tales* is usually taught in translation, the language difficulties any English text presents can be daunting to English as a Second Language students. Even English-speaking students have preconceptions about reading poetry: it is

difficult to understand; it is about subjects of little or no interest; it doesn't make sense.

Many American teachers maintain a strong pedagogical preference for reading selections that reflect the ethnic population of the classroom. Teachers choose authors like Amy Tan, Zora Neale Hurston, Ha Jin, or Sandra Cisneros who speak in voices that their students easily recognize. Authors from the American canon are also consistently a part of curricula: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Arthur Miller, or J.D. Salinger. Chaucer doesn't always make the list.

In many schools, British literature is an elective, but not always a popular one. A teacher from New Hampshire writes, 'We dropped British literature this year. It wasn't that we don't believe in it; instead we needed more lower level classes ... "Brit Lit" had low numbers'. Only six students signed up for the course. British literature is often perceived as being for those students who 'love English', and who are taking college preparatory or Advanced Placement courses. The fact that many American high school students have poor reading skills influences teachers to stay away from British literature, especially Middle English literature, even in translation. In the United States, British literature may be perceived as 'old' and 'hard.' Other schools may require British literature, but the teachers often resist. As one colleague said, 'my heart's just not in it. We make room for Chaucer because our curriculum says so'. Other comments from colleagues reflect the dwindling interest in Chaucer: 'First I'll tell you what I'm doing, then comment on why Chaucer is likely being dumped.' Or, 'We only have one person teaching Chaucer...as part of a British literature program...only five or six students per year sign up to take it'.

The tendency to drop Chaucer from the curriculum can be explained in several ways. American teachers have an unusual degree of choice about what they teach. If students have poor reading skills, then texts more accessible than Chaucer are logical choices. Because the United States has such a strong immigrant tradition, and because the image of the American 'melting pot' is changing, strong ethnic voices are emerging in contemporary American literature. American students are often both compelled and validated by reading the works of authors who write about experiences the students have actually had and in voices that they instantly recognize. A typical classroom goal is to teach and improve reading skills, and teachers pick those texts to which the students connect.

Furthermore, in the United States, having a college degree in English does not automatically mean that the person holding that degree has studied Chaucer. The absence of a national curriculum applies to colleges and universities as well as to high schools. A student of literature may take a degree with a specific focus like Women's Studies, or African American Literature and never encounter Chaucer during college. Teachers choose to teach those authors with whom they are familiar and for whom they have developed a passionate interest.

Passing a formal written examination on Chaucer is not a requirement either for graduation or for college admission in the United States. Because the pressure to master medieval literature and to pass an examination on the material is absent from American high schools, teachers have the freedom to drop Chaucer from their syllabi without consequences for their students. Most who opt to 'dump' him would use one of these reasons: the students can't read it; the students need to read literature to which they can immediately relate; I don't know anything about Chaucer; the students don't need to

know this material.

Of course many teachers love Chaucer and realize just how important a figure he is. Before I began this article, I asked several colleagues from various regions of the United States for information about their best practices for teaching Chaucer. Many responded enthusiastically and shared successful high school classroom strategies which I will describe in detail.

### **Particular challenges of teaching Chaucer**

Teaching reading in American high schools presents a challenge in itself. The role of reading in American life is changing significantly. In the popular culture that media influences so deeply, athletics and consumerism are governing values. The act of reading requires an often uncomfortable reversal of students' typical experience. When they play sports, students are physically active and narrowly focused cognitively. When students read, they are physically inactive and actively working cognitively, often on more than one level. Television advertising bombards young people with rapid, highly-lit images that stimulate the pulse, but not the mind. As a result of television viewing and computer time spent 'instant messaging' friends and playing video games, many students spend hours each day both physically and cognitively inactive. They are involved in low level communication, and do not experience high level, complex thinking.

Because the kind of abstract, cognitive work that reading requires is unusual even for many seventeen and eighteen year olds, they may describe their reading experiences as 'too hard', or 'boring'. When teachers consider the influence of television, computers, video games and movies on students' perception of narrative, they can better understand such comments as 'Nothing ever happens in this book', and 'There are just too many words in this novel'. The electronic image has diminished the role of imagination in the lives of many young people.

Introducing Chaucer to most American high school students in the context of popular American culture presents unique challenges. American high school students may have difficulty perceiving their connections to the historical past, since their knowledge of history is limited. Many high schools require American history courses, but European history is not always a required part of the high school curriculum. Much of the material in Chaucer's poetry is completely foreign to American students. They are familiar neither with concepts such as the wheel of fortune, humours or physiognomy, nor with events like the Black Death, the Crusades, pilgrimages, and the Peasants' Revolt.

Studying Chaucer helps students realize that literature serves important purposes in the history of human kind. It is a social, historical, and cultural document as well as a story. To read the 'General Prologue' of the *Canterbury Tales* is to gaze directly into the late Middle Ages. Although American history is relatively short, human history is not; high school students can perceive that they are connected to a long and meaningful past through reading Chaucer. To understand this human interconnectedness is exceptionally important to adolescents.

'Why do we have to read this?' is a question all teachers hear at one time or another. Although irritating, it is a question that deserves a serious answer. Ultimately, the motivation to read the text will reside in the content of the teacher's reply to this question.

Students need two categories of information to support their reading efforts: **context** and **connection**. Providing context for high school students can be a problem if the teacher resorts solely to lecturing. The Middle Ages has a long and complex history, and most high school students will have trouble sitting still for ‘talking head’ teaching. Without context, students will not adequately understand the text. Without understanding, they won't make the personal connections that give the text meaning for them. Once a student begins to read the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer himself will solve many reading motivation problems with his lively, detailed window not only into the Middle Ages, but also into the minds of characters whose connections to us are apparent and irresistible. But to achieve understanding and appreciation of the poetry, teachers must bring the students into the text.

### **Strategies for creating the enthusiasts of tomorrow**

#### Exploring the Middle Ages

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‘Exploring the Middle Ages’ is a strategy in which students research the Middle Ages and discover contexts for the *Canterbury Tales*. The teacher guides the students' work, but does not lecture on an historical period that may compel the teacher, but not the students. In fact, this method virtually eliminates the traditional lecture format which students find ‘boring’. It also allows a teacher who is not a Chaucer expert to guide and participate as students discover information about the Middle Ages. When students have the opportunity to pursue research more independently, they are often ‘hooked’ on the Middle Ages.

The goal of ‘Exploring the Middle Ages’ is to engage the students in a method called ‘Inquiry’ to explore various elements of the *Canterbury Tales* in their medieval contexts. Inquiry shifts the focus of learning from the teacher as an ‘expert’, to the students as ‘researchers’. In a traditional lecture format, students are essentially passive. In an Inquiry format, students are active and engaged. ‘Exploring the Middle Ages’ teaches many essential skills: close reading, analytical thinking, leading and participating in discussion, productive participation in group work, and formal speech skills. Inquiry allows students not only to discover but also to discriminate among many valuable resources, both print and electronic, for learning about the Middle Ages. Students prioritize the contextual information they need to present to their classmates comprehensive portraits of the pilgrims within their historical, cultural, and social context. Inquiry also provides opportunities to practise the skills needed to discover that information.

At the beginning of the Inquiry activity, the teacher places students in groups and assigns responsibility for specific pilgrims to each group. Typically American classrooms have about thirty students. Ten groups of three gives each triad three pilgrims on whom to base its work. The class reads the ‘General Prologue’ independently as homework. Depending on the skill level of the class, two to four reading assignments are adequate to

finish. When the class completes reading the 'General Prologue', the teacher leads the students in a brainstorm intended to identify what the students still want to know about the various pilgrims. For example, during a brainstorm on the Wife of Bath, students may ask how a woman who lived in a time they perceive as oppressive to women could travel freely and have her own money. They might have questions about her style of dress, or why the fact that she is a weaver is so important. They may ask why Chaucer gives such specific details about her physical appearance. They may want to know what Ypres and Ghent are, and why they are important.

Groups then base their research about the pilgrims on the questions their peers generate. Each group's goal is to make a detailed and insightful presentation to the class which places characters within medieval contexts. For example, students research information on medieval marriage practice, women's legal status, the medieval perceptions of marriage, property rights, the Lollards, and many other aspects of medieval culture and society as they seek to answer their classmates' questions. The research leads to a group presentation on the assigned characters.

Presentations can take the form of Power Point, skits, multimedia, songs, puppet shows, videos, or any other method the students create, subject to teacher approval.

To evaluate the presentations, break the assignment into three elements:

**1. Content:**

- Do the students present the pilgrims in a social, political, and historical context?
- Does the group provide a bibliography of both web sites and print sources in the required format?
- Is the bibliography annotated? Do the annotations establish author reliability, credentials, and potential biases?

**2. Design and execution**, based on a rubric which the teacher provides, and which may include:

- overheads
- posters
- maps
- handouts for the class

**3. Group Process Skills**, based on a rubric that the teacher provides, and which may include:

- delegating tasks
- using time management skills
- setting manageable sub goals
- making sure each member has a role within the group.

The teacher may weight any of these elements to suit the students' skills and experience with this type of work. Students may also provide feedback to their peers. After the presentations are completed, the class may participate in a discussion of the quality of their work, celebrating successes and articulating ways to improve their efforts next time. The following website contains many helpful rubrics:

<http://school.discovery.com.schrockguide>.

The presentations culminate in a whole class project that may assume many forms: timelines to which every group contributes, a class-generated annotated bibliography taken from the sources each group has consulted and used, or a class notebook which includes recommended electronic sources, sample handouts and

overhead transparencies from the presentations, students' reflections on the process of their learning, and useful information from their research.

The Inquiry strategy discourages cognitive passivity and encourages dynamic learning because control of the work shifts from the teacher to the students. The rubrics provide guidance and communicate expectations for the quality of work the students produce. After all, teachers already know how to research and apply knowledge; students need to learn and practise these skills. Should a student group not include crucial concepts or information, the teacher can interject at appropriate moments. Learning about their specific pilgrims in depth motivates students to read their various tales; their newly discovered knowledge puts them into the narrative, where Chaucer himself will compel their reading. The active role students assume in their learning in an Inquiry format affords young people opportunities to practise the skills, especially research, that will support their life-long learning. Research and presentation skills are useful in most areas of endeavour they may pursue after completing their schooling.

### Character Maps

Ann Sofia developed this activity. Her email address is [ann.sofia@sdhc.k12.fl.us](mailto:ann.sofia@sdhc.k12.fl.us). Since students' learning styles tend to be visual, the Character Maps strategy helps students to picture the complexities of Chaucer's pilgrims. Begin with a brainstorm list taken from what the students already know about the Middle Ages. Then generate a second list of what they would like to know. During the initial brainstorm, distribute a graphic organizer with two labeled columns to give structure to the students' note-taking. Concentrate on context. Ann says, 'I place a heavy emphasis on the historic period: Peasants' Revolt, rise of the middle class, plague, status of women in English society'. Working from the students' prior knowledge and their curiosity about certain aspects of English culture in the Middle Ages, compare the students' assumptions about the medieval world to the realities of the Middle Ages. Since the *Canterbury Tales* is an estates satire, based on what happens when people do not live in accordance with their estates, students begin to perceive that, just like in their own world, what they assume will happen is not always what happens. The richest learning occurs as the students explore these discrepancies.

Encourage students to approach the 'General Prologue' as if Chaucer is presenting a 'snapshot' of the Middle Ages. In the absence of a camera, his words are captured light, his pages are film. As students begin to examine this 'picture' more closely, they have questions. How is the Prioress travelling and with whom? Why is the Wife of Bath free to travel wherever she wishes? Why is the Reeve at the back of the procession? How are the Five Tradesmen dressed? What is a 'Manciple'? A 'Summoner'? A 'Pardoner'? Why are they going on a pilgrimage? Where is the author in all of this? What are these people like and why are they acting this way?

To lead students to the answers to these questions, use Character Maps, which provide a visual format for character analysis. Typically, a character map places a character's name at the centre of the page. Then in circles or boxes, which are connected to the character's name by lines, the students write descriptions of the character's feelings, words, thoughts, appearance, personality, behaviour, or motivations. Ask students to provide quotes from the text to support their observations. Furthermore, students have to use research skills to complete their character maps, because unless the characters are

clearly placed in their particular contexts, many aspects of their behaviours and personalities don't make sense. The model works very well for students who are inexperienced readers because the Character Map requires them to break characters' personalities into elements which are arranged visually. Once students understand these lively characters, they will make connections to them. Empathy with the pilgrims motivates students to read their tales. Furthermore, when students identify and clearly understand character traits, they can write analytical and expository essays more effectively.

Conclude the activity by having students make drawings of their pilgrims to display in the classroom. Almost any student can relate to Chaucer's pilgrims, once they have unlocked their identities: teenagers understand the animosity that causes the Reeve and the Miller to walk at opposite ends of the pilgrimage; many are familiar with scandals in the Catholic Church; many have parents with social and economic ambitions like the Tradesmen; they understand the effects of debt on the Merchant; they have seen older adults, like the Knight, whose role in the world has changed, and for whom the past holds more significance than the future.

#### Creating the Chaucerian pilgrimage

Paul Hogan developed this activity for his 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, aged 17-18 years. His email address is: [phogan@jeuitportland.com](mailto:phogan@jeuitportland.com)

Students at all ability levels learn best from their personal experiences. Paul Hogan has designed a Chaucerian Pilgrimage that his British literature class takes in the spring, when 'longen folk to goon on pilgrimages' ('GP' 12). Students travel to locations on the school campus which have personal significance. There they read the tales they have written in imitation of Chaucer. A full and more detailed description and discussion of this teaching strategy is available at [http://www.teamsmedieval.org/scientia\\_scholae/](http://www.teamsmedieval.org/scientia_scholae/) in the February 2003 issue of *Scientia Scholae*, 'Creating the Chaucerian Pilgrimage', by Donna Dermond and Paul Hogan.

Essentially, the pilgrimage activity accomplishes two important purposes: it helps students appreciate Chaucer's formidable skills as a poet by challenging them to write a 'tale' in iambic pentameter, and it creates fresh perceptions of peers within the classroom culture. The fact that the pilgrimage supports positive peer relationships is possibly its most important function. Even though Chaucer's pilgrims argue and express mutual disapproval, the student pilgrimage allows participants to see their peers in new ways which tend to foster respect. The fact every student has written a poem and all students perform their poems forges connections among them.

In addition, the activity teaches specific information and skills. For example, as the students write, they learn and practise Chaucer's literary devices such as allusion, descriptive detail, metaphor, and imagery. Students also refine their use of satirical techniques such as hyperbole, verbal irony, and tone. They must identify a target for their satire, and understand how to imply needed change or a solution through that person's appearance, behaviours, or dialogue. Since they share their tales with their fellow pilgrims, they practise public speaking skills. By going on a pilgrimage, students enrich their understanding of the *Canterbury Tales* significantly. As Paul Hogan says, 'They may also develop the love for literature that comes when we climb into the author's shoes and walk a few miles'.

Adolescents love satire; they relate to it and understand it readily. But they are often so adept at satire that they may easily violate boundaries. An important element of preparing students for this activity is to establish guidelines for content. Any adolescent who has read Chaucer's portrayal of bawdy characters may 'inflate the bawdiness quotient' in their original tales. Teachers know that 'language as a tool can create, destroy, tickle, entertain, or put to sleep. Students must recognize the difference between material appropriate for the locker room and that appropriate to the classroom' (Dermond and Hogan, 'Creating the Chaucerian Pilgrimage'). Teenagers have a strong sense of fair play, and will tend to rein in their bawdier impulses, but requiring 'revisions of rough drafts that threaten to cross the line of good humor or fair play' is not unusual.

Writing the tales is a challenge, but students certainly rise to it. A close reading of the 'General Prologue' makes students aware of Chaucer's use of detail, simile, dialogue, verbal irony, and allusion to enliven his writing. Since their tales are in imitation of Chaucer, they must also try to copy his poetic techniques such as iambic metre, alliteration, and rhyme as well as the techniques of satire. Since the writing is complex, the teacher should provide clear requirements:

- The students are to write a minimum of six ten-line stanzas
- The stanzas must *approximate* iambic metre
- The stanzas must maintain an AA, BB, CC rhyme scheme.
- The first ten-line stanza must provide the 'frame', as Chaucer does in his prologue.

Teachers should break the assignment into two parts and establish due dates. For example, require the first three stanzas on Monday and the last three on Friday. Make time during the week to work with students to evaluate the work in progress for both content and technique. The time spent revising the first three stanzas can ensure that students are staying within the boundaries of propriety.

When the tales are complete, each student provides two copies, one for the teacher who acts as the host during the pilgrimage, and one from which the student will read when the time to share the tale arrives. Drawing straws to see who goes first makes for an authentic beginning to the storytelling: 'Now draweth cut, er that we ferrer twynne; / He which that hath the shorteste shal bigynne' ('GP' 835-6). As the host, the teacher decides who has provided 'best sentence and moost solaas' ('GP' 798). Since the prize for the best tale is 'a soper at oure aller cost' ('GP' 799) the teacher/host provides a gustatory prize.

During the pilgrimage, students take their classmates to their significant locations on campus: 'A softball player may deliver her tale from the pitcher's mound, or the chess team captain from that secret room at the back of the library. Thus, the cafeteria, the attendance office, the stage, the gym, the darkroom, and the football field all become stations of the pilgrimage'. As classmates see others in their 'sacred places', 'They listen to each other more carefully and perceive aspects of character that they may never before have noticed' (Dermond and Hogan, 'Creating the Chaucerian Pilgrimage'). The human connections are immediate and strong, and surely support the students' understanding of Chaucer's pilgrims.

Because this activity has both academic and personal content, it should be assessed in two ways. For the writing strand, assess both technique and content as in this

sample rubric:

Technique

- Contains 10 syllables per line
- Maintains Chaucerian rhyme scheme
- Uses verbal irony/satirical tone
- Uses poetic devices

Content

- Character is vivid
- Satirical criticism is clear
- Provides insight and humour
- Uses descriptive detail

As in any rubric, teachers can adjust the elements according to the techniques and content they emphasize.

Since this activity also engages students on an emotional level, an oral debrief or a final written reflection allows the students to address their feelings and helps the teacher evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the activity. Following are a few useful questions for either oral debriefs or reflective journal responses:

- How did you feel during this activity?
- What did you learn from this activity?
- What will you do with what you learned?
- What would you change about this activity? Why?
- What aspect of the activity did you like? Why?

Many students refer to the pilgrimage activity as ‘the most memorable lesson of the year’. Their positive responses are based on the fact that the participants learn so much. ‘Their knowledge of and appreciation for Geoffrey Chaucer increases. Students come to appreciate how difficult writing poetry can be, and find new respect for poets and poetry as they learn to apply iambic meter, simile, alliteration and rhyme. In addition, students learn about themselves in the context of human experience and endeavor which is both ancient and forever new’.

The pilgrimage is an exceptionally effective way to provide meaningful contexts for Chaucer's characters and certainly establishes strong connections between young readers and his medieval pilgrims. But most importantly, the activity fosters understanding and empathy among classmates, who often begin to perceive themselves as fellow pilgrims on their journey through school, or even through life. ‘Recognizing the connections that exist among students is an essential element to building a classroom community’. All teachers hope that the empathy and tolerance they create survive beyond the walls of their classrooms.

Students as teachers

This activity contains elements from several contributors’ classroom practices. Please refer to the email addresses at the end of the article.

Many teachers agree that students reap the greatest benefits when they take control of their learning. We tend to learn best those things that we teach, so when a group of students teaches a selected Canterbury tale to their peers, the results are powerful. Students learn and practise close reading, research, organization and time management, public speaking, group process and computer skills.

In a class of about thirty students, form six groups of five students and assign each group a tale. A typical selection would include ‘The Prioress’, ‘The Miller’, ‘The

Knight', 'The Clerk', 'The Nun's Priest', and 'The Wife of Bath'. The students' goal is to prepare and teach the assigned tale to their classmates.

Within each group, assign specific roles and tasks for each member. One student can research the historical context for the tale. Another can find literary and rhetorical devices in the text and provide examples. A third can provide a summary of the tale that isolates the most important narrative elements. Another student can identify the satirical content of the tale and provide text references. A student with advanced computer skills can make graphics, design handouts, or prepare a Power Point presentation. One student in each group should take on the role of the facilitator. In addition to completing his/her delegated academic task, this person helps the group stay organized, checks to make sure the due dates will be met on time, makes sure every member participates, and talks with the teacher when necessary to ask for help with any aspect of the teaching project. Although the facilitator has added responsibilities, well-designed group work usually runs smoothly so that the role is not overly burdensome. If teachers use group format for other literature units throughout the academic year, the role of facilitator should rotate so that every student in the class eventually has a chance to act as a group facilitator.

Planning an activity like this requires close attention to detail. On the first day, distribute an overview of the project complete with intermediate goals and due dates. The entire process should take about three to four weeks. The first two weeks are for reading, research, and making sure their lessons are clear and meet the requirements for both content and time. The third week is given to the actual teaching. A fourth week may be added if more time is needed. Isolate major tasks such as reading deadlines, research, and preparation of visual materials, providing a due date for each step of the process. Factoring in accountability helps prevent the procrastination so common among adolescents.

Develop a rubric that clearly delineates the elements of the project you plan to evaluate, and assign values to each element. To communicate expectations, distribute the rubric to students before they begin their work. Teachers can weight elements according to which skills they wish to emphasize. Rubrics may evaluate both content of the student lesson and the process students used to create and plan it.

#### Content

- Clear organization
- Accurate, helpful information
- Demonstrates satirical techniques
- Demonstrates literary devices
- Refers to text

#### Group Process Skills

- Completed delegated task
- Performed assigned role
- Met all deadlines
- Participated actively
- Helped resolve conflicts

#### Teaching Techniques

- Uses visual aids
- Provides handouts
- Involves class in discussion
- Answers questions from students
- Involves class in activity

Once the tales are assigned, negotiate teaching dates. The more accessible tales

should be scheduled first to allow more time for groups working on longer or more difficult texts. Make a schedule of teaching dates, distribute it to all students, and post it in the classroom. Depending on the length of the class period, the number of groups, the skill levels of the students, and how many weeks the teacher chooses to give to the unit, the teaching sessions should last about 45 –60 minutes.

A typical lesson would begin with the historical context for the tale, during which the student presenting could use an overhead projector or Power Point to illustrate his/her material. A brief summary of the tale and an interpretation of the tale's themes could follow. Identification of literary techniques with examples from the text are an important part of any presentation such as this. If appropriate, students should identify the satirical techniques Chaucer uses, and what the targets of his satire are. The group should be responsible for providing handouts as needed. Finally, the group teaching the lesson could lead the class in a discussion of their tale. End the lesson with a question and answer period.

Debriefs are always helpful. I suggest a guided debrief similar to the one for the pilgrimage. Every debrief should include opportunities for the students to articulate their feelings, what they have learned from their experiences, and how their learning applies to their lives. Often high school students find articulating abstract self-evaluations intimidating, if not impossible. Guidance such as this supports their reflections whether expressed orally or in journal form.

Students can evaluate the lessons as well. However, I also suggest guidance here. Provide a sheet which allows the students to rate strengths on a scale of one to ten with ten being highest. Elements to be rated could include clarity of information, depth of research, interest level, organization, effective audio-visual aids, useful answers to questions. Be sure to include an opportunity for an open-ended response such as:

- What do you think this group did best?
- Do you have unanswered questions about the information they taught today?
- Was there anything you didn't understand?

Questions like these help the teacher determine what material should be discussed, reviewed, or revisited.

During the two weeks of preparation, teachers should be available for consultation, and schedule ample time for library and Internet research. Teachers can answer questions and make suggestions, but should remain in the role of guide, and only intervene if a group is completely off track, unable to work together, or clearly in error. Monitoring student progress closely and staying aware of each group's progress is important, but the teacher's role is to encourage creativity, offer guidance, and let the students do the work themselves. At the end of the unit, the teacher may go back to lead further discussion or to add needed information.

When students teach their peers, their own learning assumes meaning and importance. They understand the material better because they have taught it to others.

## **Conclusion**

Although Chaucer's place in the American high school is in jeopardy, vibrant, creative, student-centered teaching can still make his wonderful poetry part of every student's

experience. Every teacher can make the strategies in this article their own, and customize them to suit the needs of their classes. Hopefully, by using techniques that actively engage students in Chaucer's poetry, we can assure that there will be Chaucer enthusiasts for generations to come.

## **SOURCES**

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For rubrics to evaluate a wide variety of classroom activities and projects go to:

<http://school.discovery.com.schrockguide/> (teacher helper, assessment and rubrics, general rubrics)

For information on teaching the Middle Ages go to: <http://www.teamsmedieval.org/>

The TEAMS website also includes lesson plans, conference information, publications and other resources for teachers.

For information on live theatrical performances of the *Canterbury Tales* go to:

[www.chaucertheatre.org](http://www.chaucertheatre.org), or, go straight to school performances:

<http://www.chaucertheatre.org/html/schools.html>.

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The Consortium for Teaching of the Middle Ages which includes lesson plans, teaching strategies, publications, conference information, and resources for teachers.

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## **FURTHER READING**

Cooper, Helen, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Provides critical readings of the tales as well as historical information and context. Very useful as preparation for teaching the *Canterbury Tales*.

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*England* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998). An authentic, personal glimpse into the lives of an actual medieval family with well-written connective narrative that makes the past seem immediate.

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